

Classic Posters - Rick Griffin, Psychedelics, and the Tibetan Tradition

by Michael Erlewine

It is a kind of unspoken fact that Rick Griffin is considered the heavyweight when it comes to who put the 'Psychedelic' in psychedelic posters. Every art form has its nadir or point of greatest specific gravity and, when it comes to serious posters, Griffin is pretty much the undisputed king. He is the only poster artist of that era to have spawned a number of essays (here is one now!) trying to figure out what he meant -- what he was all about.

To give you some musical parallels: Every blues lover knows that Robert Johnson is THE heavyweight, when it comes to that genre. There are all kinds of essays on Johnson too, how he sold his soul to the devil, and so on. Some claim that is the reason why he can sing so that the hairs stand up on your neck. With female jazz singers, the heavyweight title usually goes to Billie Holiday. No one has more substance or soul than she does. And most of us know Muhammad Ali is the heavyweight champion of boxing. Pele is the king with soccer, Tiger Woods has a head start on holding the title with golf, and so on. Every art form has its heavyweight.

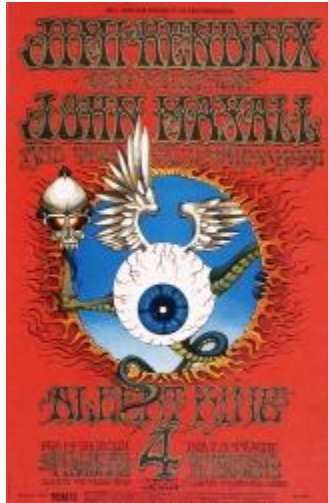
I even believe that most poster buffs more or less agree that Rick Griffin is the (or one of the) heavyweight(s) when it comes to the substance or meaning of psychedelic posters. Where we are going to run into some real differences is the part where we attempt to say

just what it is about Griffin's work that makes it so poignant, seminal, or whatever words we could agree on.

Those of us who have taken acid trips that managed to strip us of our everyday habit of ignoring just about everything that is going on around us will see in the symbolism of Griffin, something we can recognize as of greater moment, not surreal, but more real than everyday reality.

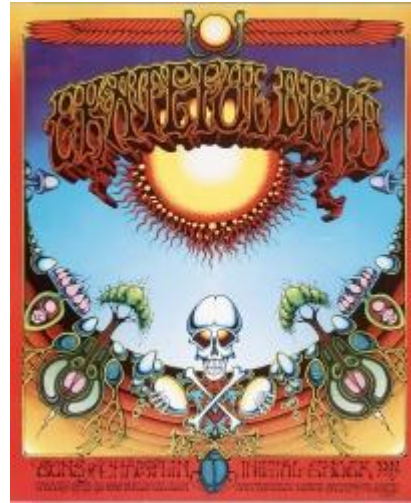
Many say Griffin's special qualities come from his early exposure to the lore and legends of Native Americans. His father, who was an amateur archeologist, often took him on digs -- trips to the American Southwest. I would agree with those that state the Griffin somehow absorbed and was able to express some of what is essential about the Native American spiritual views. It seems correct to me that Griffin's art, at its most poignant, resonates to the words of Carlos Casteneda and the very real magic of his teacher, Don Juan. These two seem to be reading from the same book, but this still does not really explain it. They share a vision that we can but peek at. They both point to the same thing, Rick Griffin and Carlos Casteneda, but what is it that they are pointing at?

Perhaps the best-known Griffin piece is BG-105, the Flying Eyeball.



The Flying Eyeball

Of these, the archetype of the Griffin style (for me) is the Axomoxoa. The Aoxomoxoa contains in one image all the elements that I most associate with Griffin, minus what is probably the image most connected with Griffin, the Flying Eyeball. In fact, BG-105, the Flying Eyeball, may be the single most recognizable poster from that era. While I am not, in any way, dismissing that poster, still, I find the most perfect, the most complete expression of Griffin in the Soundproof Productions poster for the Grateful Dead, that has been nicknamed the Aoxomoxoa. It is this poster that most perfectly, for me, also expresses the essence of what is compelling in the work of Rick Griffin, not to mention Carlos Castanada.



Rick Griffin's 'Oxomoxoa'

The image of the skull and skeletons is an intrinsic part of the psychedelic poster scene and the psychedelic scene, in general. Witness the Grateful Dead, the most popular band (the most in-demand posters) of that era.

It is axiomatic at this point that the psychedelic experience quite often is pictured as a process of letting go, a symbolic dying to be reborn, letting go of a confining current view and taking a new grip on life. Whole books have been written about this experience.

Griffin's imagery seems to capture that realm beyond everyday life, a kind of eternal present, in which the everlasting nature of the life/death process is forever taking place.

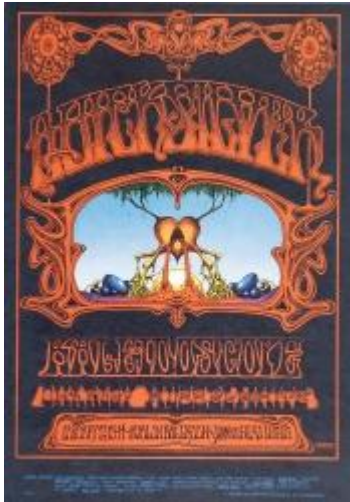
For any readers who have had a profound psychedelic experience, in particular, one involving casting off the bonds of guilt and psychological blinders, the imagery of Griffin is hardly news. It is a reminder of what may well be the most imprinting and powerful experience that we can know, short of

permanent realization or true awakening.

What I hope to bring to this discussion is the result of some 35 years of experience with Tibetan Buddhism and its very similar imagery.

I have read and heard from many people who find the Griffin imagery troubling or even frightening. The accent on the skull and death is viewed by some as threatening. Death has a long history as the gatekeeper to the eternal life, the everlasting process of life that Griffin depicts.

1968-01-12 FD-101 Eternal Reservoir, bleeding heart (important in this context)



The Eternal Reservoir

We see the same kind of imagery in Tibetan Buddhism, where any number of fierce protectors, with garlands of skulls, protect the essential truth from those who would ignore or degrade it.

In Griffin's Aoxomoxoa, through the veil of death and ignorance, the eternal sun is drawing

forth life from the ground. Womb-like images giving birth to living trees. Embryos in wombs with lotus-like flowers are taking in the sun's rays.

Those of you reading this, who have had creative experiences, those who have created music or art (or whatever) that has been fresh enough, good enough to last for some time, know all too well that the best art is not created with a conceptual understanding of what the artist is doing. All too often the artist places as a central motif what he or she themselves don't fully understand.

From deep within, we bring out that which fascinates us, that which will withstand the onslaught of time, and not something we already have listened to or seen a thousand times, from which we have sucked all the sense from. Instead, we place whatever is fresh from us, that which we too are still trying to grasp or fathom. We place it for all to see, including ourselves, for us to appreciate and figure out as well as the public, together, to enjoy together.

1967-12-26 2.230 Grope for Peace [1258] (a sign of things to come)



Grove for Peace

This is what I feel Griffin has done, placed for everyone to see, including himself, what was most essential, what would last the longest. In short, I am certain he was as knocked out by the Aoxomoxoa as we are.

It is documented that Griffin had a strong interest in occult and esoteric studies, in particular the Theosophical Movement of Madame Blavatsky, Annie Besant, and, most of all, C.W. Leadbetter. The Theosophical movement in its totality has often been described as a form of esoteric Buddhism. The use of the word 'esoteric' here is somewhat misleading. The theosophical movement drew its inspiration from Buddhism and most of its leaders had actually journeyed to Tibet or at least to India and that part of the world. They did their best to make sense of the form of Buddhism they found (mostly Tibetan Buddhism), but their take on it was only esoteric, because it was provisionary, a first approach. The Theosophists labored to translate what they were learning, what they felt and intuited into something that would be

recognizable to a Western audience. In that sense, it was esoteric. In a very real way, the Theosophical movement was Buddhism "Through a glass darkly," as the Bible says.

1969-02-07 Winged Eyeball, Soundproof (important in this context)



The Winged Eyeball

It was this form of esoteric knowledge that Griffin studied, with all of its conscious symbolism, graphic signs, motifs, and so on. It is a lore of avatars, Eastern adepts, Brothers of the White Lodge, Mahatmas, and so on. And of all the rather heady writers in the movement, none made more practical sense in words than C.W. Leadbetter. It was he whom Griffin is reported to have most studied. The Theosophical movement and writings are one of the mainstays of Western occultism in the early 20th Century. I say this with some experience. I served as vice-president of the Michigan Theosophists in the early '70s and have gone on to study Tibetan Buddhism, in practice, over the last 30 years or so. I can say that the Theosophists could but guess at and attempt to fathom the centuries-old ideas of Tibetan Buddhism. It has been said that it takes Buddhism something like 300 years to come into a county. Well, Blavatsky was just making contact at that point. We are maybe a century

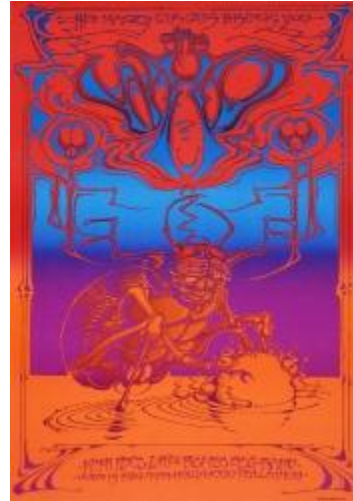
into the process in North America, and Buddhism is still just beginning to be understood.

In the mid '70s, the Karmapa who, like the Dalai Lama, is the leader of an entire (but separate) lineage of Tibetan Buddhism traveled to the Southwest to meet with the leaders of the Hopi Nation. The Hopis' had a legend that one day men with red hats would come (the Tibetan lamas wore red hats), who would be their true brothers. The Hopis believed these men in red hats were the Tibetan lamas who came. And it is said by the Hopi, that these lamas created a rainstorm in the middle of an extensive period of drought. They had a kind of reunion.

It seems that the Hopis and the Tibetans found they had a lot in common, that they shared a common vision. And I am not saying, simply, that Rick Griffin was reaching for the concepts of Tibetan Buddhism or those of the Native Americans he had studied. What I am saying is that both these groups have something in common with the psychedelic experience, a belief and (and they would say) a knowledge that death and, particularly, the fear of death, is something that blinds us from a truer reality. And that by overcoming that fear, by somehow (even temporarily) dying to it, there is an extraordinary reality to be known. It is this realization, this extraordinary reality that Griffin, the Theosophists, the Native Americans, and the Tibetan Buddhist all point to in their traditions. This same experience is integral to the psychedelic experience for many. This is what they share in common and it

is this landscape we see in posters like the Aoxomoxoa.

1969-06-13 Who Poco ((important in this context, but different)



Who/Poco

My point is that Rick Griffin not only had an solid introduction to the folklore and imagery of the Native Americans of the Southwest, but also a strong dose of metaphysics, in the form of Theosophical ideas, a potent combination. More important than either of these influences is the fact that Griffin obviously had a strong psychedelic experience and a penchant for religion. Witness his re-conversion experience to Christianity later in life.

Griffin seems to have had a very strong psychedelic experience, complete with visions into extraordinary reality. He attempted to make sense of it and conceptualize it through means like his Theosophical studies. Unfortunately, the fabric of that organization was not sufficiently developed to contain his entire experience. It is my view that when he was not able to contain his experience within

this theoretical framework, and when this esoteric construct failed him, he reverted to his native Christianity in an attempt to find a framework or base that was more stable. While Christianity did not support the psychedelic signatures he had developed, it did provide a solid framework within which to live and raise a family. I say this because there were no more Aoxomoxoas after his conversion. That psychedelic element, the Native American motifs and the strong psychedelic vision are absent or are watered down or even made humorous in later works. We still have the flying eyeballs, but they have become little comic characters. No more do we find the stark Castaneda-like landscapes that we see in the Aoxomoxoa posters and the Flying Eyeball. I am not complaining; just trying to understand how it might have went down.

We can agree that there is something special about the prose of Carlos Castaneda, the songs of Robert Johnson, Billie Holiday, or Bob Dylan, for that matter. The same is true for those classic Griffin psychedelic posters. Our interest in them is something more than just a tribute to their persons. It is something that points beyond any person to a common reality that we all share, whether we realize it or not. Posters like Griffin's, songs like Holiday's and Dylan's help to point out or remind us of this inner or sacred landscape. These artists help us to, for a moment, pause from our ingrained habit of ignoring this part of ourselves and somehow focus beyond our normal patterns of ignorance to something more permanent, call it an inner landscape, whatever.

Those few great psychedelic posters of Rick Griffin remains as landmarks in the landscape of the '60s.



Hawaiian Aoxomoxo

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